



# LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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For IR Public Health column

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## **Bad Dogs a Preventable Threat to Public Health**

Nothing spoils a lovely spring outing like an unrestrained dog with a vicious agenda.

Just ask my co-worker.

During a brisk walk meant to improve her health, this woman (let's call her Abby) encountered four dogs romping in an unfenced yard with their owner. The dogs turned as one and rushed at her, barking furiously.

Abby has never been afraid of dogs. She assumed that, if she strolled by, paying them no attention, they'd eventually mind their own business, too.

But her assumption proved wrong in the end – which is precisely where one of the dogs bit her.

Savvy public health professional that she is, Abby reported the bite to the Helena police. They assigned an animal control officer to investigate.

### **A Public Health Problem**

Abby knew that the bite was not just a painful and embarrassing injury to her own, er, pride. She also knew that an aggressive dog can be a threat to public health.

What if the dog had rabies? What if it had a history of biting? What if its next victim were a child, with more vulnerable body parts, like the face, at snout level?

According to the American Veterinary Medicine Association, man's best friend bites more than 4.7 million people a year in this country. In one of six cases, the bite causes an injury that requires medical attention. Children are the most common victims and are most likely to be seriously injured.

In Helena and the rest of Lewis and Clark County, animal control officers investigated an average of 120 animal bites a year, most involving dogs, in each of the the past five years.

*The mission of the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department  
is to protect and improve the health of all county residents.*

There are several ways to reduce your chances of being bitten. They range from properly socializing and training your pet, to educating children about the best way to behave around dogs, to learning how to react if a dog attacks or threatens to.

Here are some tips from animal and human health experts:

### **An Owner's Responsibility**

As a dog owner, you're responsible for your pet's behavior. By law, your dog must remain on your property or under your control at all times.

- Before getting a dog, consult a vet or trainer to learn which breed would best suit your household.
- Be careful bringing a dog home if you have an infant or toddler.
- Socialize and train your pet when it's a young so it will feel at ease around people and other animals.
- Neuter your dog to reduce aggression.
- Walk and exercise your dog regularly to keep it healthy and provide mental stimulation.
- Use a leash in public to make sure you can control your dog.
- Make sure your dog can't escape from your property.
- Make sure your dog is up to date on required vaccinations. All dogs over 6 months of age must have a current rabies shot.
- Never leave a baby or small child alone with any dog.
- Don't play aggressive games with your dog.
- License your dog, as required by law. You can buy a city or county dog license at the Humane Society. City licenses are also available in Room 320 of the City-County Building, county licenses in Room 113.

### **Bite Prevention Tips**

If you have children, teach them these basic safety tips and review them regularly:

- Never approach strange dogs.
- Don't turn your back on a dog, run from it, or scream.
- Stay still if approached by an unfamiliar dog.
- If you're knocked over, roll into a ball and lie still.
- Don't extend your hand to an unfamiliar dog; it makes an easy mouthful.
- Avoid direct eye contact with dogs.
- Don't disturb a dog that's sleeping, eating, or caring for puppies.

### **When the Dog Bites**

- If the owner is present, ask for a name and contact information. If not, note the appearance of the dog and the address for investigating officers.
- Clean the wound with soap and water as soon as possible. Apply an antiseptic.
- Consult your doctor, or go to the emergency room if it's after office hours.

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By law, you must promptly report every dog (or other animal) bite that breaks the skin, either to a city animal control officer (442-3233 or 447-8461) or the county officer (447-8293), depending on whether the incident took place inside or outside the city limits.

If the dog owner has no proof of rabies vaccination, the dog will be quarantined for at least 10 days at the owner's expense. The owner may be fined, and the dog may be destroyed depending on circumstances.

In Abby's case, the four-legged culprit successfully completed a quarantine period and all was well in the end – or at least it will be as soon as Abby's end heals completely.

To learn more about local dog control ordinances:

- City: [www.ci.helena.mt.us/departments/police-department/animal-control](http://www.ci.helena.mt.us/departments/police-department/animal-control)
- County: [www.co.lewis-clark.mt.us/departments/sheriff/patrol-bureau/animal-control](http://www.co.lewis-clark.mt.us/departments/sheriff/patrol-bureau/animal-control)

To learn more about dog-bite prevention:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Dog-Bites/biteprevention](http://www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Dog-Bites/biteprevention)
- American Veterinary Medicine Association: [www.avma.org/public\\_health/dogbite](http://www.avma.org/public_health/dogbite)

*May 20-26 is National Dog Bite Prevention Week.*

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